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SUBJECT: HAMAS ARRESTS: THE POLITICS OF PRESSURE

11. SUMMARY: PALESTINIAN MILITARY LEADERS DESCRIBED THE JUNE 26 ARREST OF 40 HAMAS ACTIVISTS AS A NECESSARY STEP TO FORCE HAMAS TO CEASE VIOLENT ACTIVITIES IN GAZA AND ENTER THE POLITICAL PROCESS. THE ARRESTS, AUTHORIZED BY PLO CHAIRMAN ARAFAT AT A LATE NIGHT JUNE 25 "SECURITY COUNCIL" MEETING, WERE IN REACTION TO HAMAS LEAFLETS CLAIMING RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE JUNE 25 DONKEY CART SUICIDE BOMBING (WHICH SLIGHTLY GRAZED THREE ISRAELI SOLDIERS). CHARGES WILL NOT BE BROUGHT AGAINST MOST OF THOSE DETAINED, ACCORDING TO OUR SOURCES, AND MOST WILL BE RELEASED "WITHIN THE NEXT 48 HOURS." END SUMMARY.

12. ON JUNE 27, EMBOFF MET SEPARATELY WITH CHIEF OF PALESTINIAN SECURITY FORCES NASSER YUSIF AND CIVILIAN POLICE CHIEF GHAZI JABALI TO DISCUSS THE ARRESTS OF HAMAS ACTIVITIES EARLY ON JUNE 26. WHILE THEIR VIEWS SOMETIMES DIVERGE WIDELY, IN THIS INSTANCE THEIR COMMENTS WERE SIMILAR: IN PLO CHAIRMAN ARAFAT'S EYES, HAMAS' CLAIM OF RESPONSIBILITY (DISAVOWED LATER IN A SECOND LEAFLET) FOR THE JUNE 26 DONKEY CART SUICIDE BOMBER NEAR KHAN YUNIS WAS PROOF OF THE VIOLATION OF THE UNWRITTEN UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN THE PA AND HAMAS TO REFRAIN FROM VIOLENT ACTS WITHIN GAZA. ARAFAT FELT HE HAD TO TAKE A STAND. IN A "SECURITY COUNCIL" MEETING LATE JUNE 25, ARAFAT ISSUED THE ORDER TO ARREST 40 MEMBERS OF HAMAS, WHICH WAS CARRIED OUT BY ALL BRANCHES OF THE PALESTINIAN ARMED FORCES EARLY JUNE 126.

PA SECURITY CHIEF ON HAMAS ARREST

13. OF THE 40 ARRESTED, YUSIF DESCRIBED 18 OF THEM AS THE BULK OF THE GAZA-BASED POLITICAL LEADERSHIP OF HAMAS (INCLUDING AHMED BAHER, MAHMOUD ZAHAR, AND MUHSEN ABU EITA); THE REST WERE VARIOUS ACTIVISTS ON WHAT SOUNDS LIKE A LIST OF "USUAL SUSPECTS." BOTH SOURCES TOLD US THAT ARAFAT PERSONALLY CHOSE TO CONCENTRATE ON THE POLITICAL RATHER THAN MILITARY LEADERSHIP OF HAMAS, ALTHOUGH YUSIF SAID THAT HE HAD COUNSELED ARAFAT TO ARREST THE MILITARY LEADERS INSTEAD. BOTH JABALI AND YUSIF BELIEVE THAT HAMAS CARRIED OUT THE DONKEY CART INCIDENT AND THAT THE BELATED DENIALS WERE MERELY IN REACTION TO THE PRESSURE OF THE ARRESTS.

POLICE CHIEF VIEWS

14. JABALI SAID THAT THE ARRESTS WERE A "POLITICAL" STEP. THE ATTORNEY GENERAL AND OTHER CIVILIAN AUTHORITIES HAD NOT BEEN INVOLVED. NO CHARGES HAD BEEN BROUGHT AGAINST THE DETAINEES. HE PREDICTED THAT MOST -- BUT NOT ALL -- WOULD BE RELEASED WITHIN 48 HOURS, A VIEW SECONDED BY YUSIF. JABALI DISMISSED THE RUMORS OF IRREGULAR TREATMENT OF THE HAMAS ACTIVISTS IN HIS CUSTODY, SAYING THAT HIS POLICE HAD MORE IMPORTANT THINGS TO WORRY ABOUT THAN "SHAVING THE BEARD OF SHEIKH AHMED" (BAHER). "BUT I CAN'T SPEAK FOR THOSE BEING DETAINED BY THE SECRET POLICE," HE ADDED.

POLITICAL IMPACT OF ARAFAT'S STEP

15. YUSIF CRITICIZED HOW THE ARRESTS WERE MADE,

SAYING THAT LEGAL WARRANTS COULD HAVE BEEN ISSUED AND CHARGES BROUGHT, BUT HE AGREED WITH JABALI THAT THE ARRESTS THEMSELVES WERE A NECESSARY STEP. BOTH PREDICTED THAT BECAUSE OF THE PRESSURE HAMAS WOULD BE MORE FLEXIBLE IN ONGOING NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE PA. BOTH NOTED THAT HAMAS HAD NOT CUT OFF TALKS IN RESPONSE TO THE ARRESTS.

¶16. RESPONDING TO EMBOFF'S QUESTIONS, JABALI COMMENTED THAT HE HAD TO BE PREPARED FOR A POSSIBLE BACKLASH FROM HAMAS, BUT HE EXPECTED THAT THE IMPACT OF THE ARRESTS WOULD MOSTLY BE POSITIVE, RATHER THAN NEGATIVE. JABALI AND YUSIF SAID THAT THE TIMING HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH THE JULY 1 "DEADLINE" FOR REDEPLOYMENT NEGOTIATIONS, AND BOTH PREDICTED THAT GAZA WOULD REMAIN CALM IF THAT "DEADLINE" WERE MISSED, SINCE THE PA IS IN FIRM CONTROL OF THE SECURITY SITUATION. JABALI EXPRESSED MORE CONCERN ABOUT WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN IN THE WEST BANK, WHERE HAMAS ACTIVITISTS ARE UNDER LESS PA CONTROL AND PRESSURE.

A DISSENTING VIEW

¶17. SAMIR SIKSEK, YUSIF'S DEPUTY, EARLIER OFFERED AN INTERPRETATION OF THE ARRESTS WHICH DIVERGED GREATLY FROM THAT OF HIS BOSS AND OF JABALI. IN HIS VIEW, ARAFAT HOPED TO GOAD HAMAS INTO A VIOLENT REACTION TO PROVIDE AN EXCUSE FOR THE ISRAELIS TO SLOW NEGOTIATIONS. THAT WAY, ACCORDING TO SIKSEK, IF WHAT THE PALESTINIANS CONSIDER THE "DEADLINE" OF JULY 1 IS MISSED, ARAFAT COULD BLAME HAMAS AND PRESERVE HIS OWN POPULARITY. SIKSEK ARGUED THAT THE ARRESTS WERE ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF ARAFAT'S ARBITRARY AND AUTOCRATIC RULE WHICH SHOULD CONCERN THE UNITED STATES, IF THE USG IS STILL PROMOTING PALESTINIAN DEMOCRACY. (COMMENT: IT IS WORTH NOTING THAT SIKSEK RARELY MISSES AN OPPORTUNITY TO CRITICIZE ARAFAT AND THAT HE DID NOT EXPRESS THESE VIEWS IN FRONT OF YUSIF. END COMMENT.)